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ABSTRACT

In Scotland's unified system of juvenile justice and child welfare, the Children's Hearings system deals with over 60,000 referrals annually. If the hearing officer is satisfied that compulsory measures of supervision are necessary, it may require home supervision when the child remains at home. In 2001, over 6,000 children were on home supervision with their parent or guardian. This report presents the findings of a study of home supervision in Scotland with the aim of examining the effectiveness of home supervision in promoting beneficial changes in the life of the child. Data on a sample of 189 children on home supervision in 2001-2002 were collected from a variety of sources, including social work case records; reporters, panel members, teachers, and social workers; families; a national data set on children in home supervision; and key informants in local authorities. Findings indicated that service provision by the social work department and others in the interagency network contributed to beneficial changes in the lives of children. Broadly positive views about the effectiveness of home supervision were expressed by social workers, panel members, teachers, key informants in local authorities, and families. Children initially referred on grounds of care and protection were considered to have the most successful outcomes, followed by those referred on offense grounds. Home supervision worked least well with respect to children referred on grounds of non-attendance at school without reasonable excuse. Service in some parts of the country was affected by staff shortages. Case files revealed that some of the key statutory requirements were not being implemented in the course of home supervision, particularly in respect to care plans, the timing of the first visit to the family, and holding internal social work case reviews. Panel members and social workers identified a need for closer monitoring of home supervision. (KB)

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Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED)

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SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Scotland's Children

Children (Scotland) Act 1995

Research Findings No.4

Home Supervision

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This study of home supervision conducted from 2000-2002 was commissioned by the Scottish Executive. The research team obtained data from social work case records; reporters, panel members, teachers and social workers; families; a national data set of children on home supervision; and key informants in local authorities.

Main Findings

- In the sample of 189 children on home supervision in 2001/2002 there had been prior social work involvement, usually on a voluntary basis, in 86 per cent of cases. The families included in the study faced major difficulties including financial and housing problems, physical and mental health problems, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol misuse.
- In the majority (70%) of the 189 cases in the sample, services and resources were made available to the children and families in addition to direct social work input. The provision of services was one of two key areas identified by families as being particularly helpful to them in home supervision (the other being in respect of domestic violence).
- Interagency liaison featured in many cases. Social workers' most frequent telephone contact was with schools and their most frequent written correspondence was with solicitors, followed by health and then statutory and voluntary agencies concerned with financial and material help for families.
- In the three month period at the beginning of the year preceding the annual review in 2001/2002 there was one face to face contact per fortnight on average between the social worker and the family. The majority of social workers (69%) and of panel members (59%) considered that the social workers' contact with the family was of the right frequency. However, 39 per cent of panel members and some families complained of insufficient contact. The area for improvement most frequently identified by panel members, teachers, social workers and reporters was more social work time.
- Twenty-two per cent of cases were identified as having no social worker attached to the family for a period of several months. About three quarters of unallocated cases were found in only four authorities.
- It appeared from the case files that some of the key statutory requirements were not being implemented in the course of home supervision, particularly in respect of care plans, the timing of the first visit to the family and holding internal social work case reviews.
- Panel members and social workers identified a need for closer monitoring of home supervision, whether internally within social work departments or through some external arrangements.
- The outcomes in respect of home supervision were found to be broadly positive, particularly for children referred on care and protection grounds. Least successful were cases involving non-attendance at school without reasonable excuse.

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Background

Scotland's unified system of juvenile justice and child welfare, the Children's Hearings system, deals annually with over 60,000 referrals. On receipt of a referral, a reporter has to decide whether a hearing is or is not required and where it appears "that compulsory measures are necessary in respect of the child, he shall arrange a children's hearing to which he shall refer the case for consideration and determination" (s56(6) Children (Scotland) Act 1995). If the hearing is satisfied that compulsory measures of supervision are necessary, it may make a supervision requirement under s70(i) Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Home supervision is the non-legal term given to the supervision requirement when the child remains at home. Over 6,000 children were on home supervision with their parent or guardian in 2001.

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of the study was to examine the effectiveness of home supervision in promoting beneficial changes in the life of the child.

The objectives were to:

- describe the organisational arrangements for developing and delivering home supervision services, including an assessment of the impact of factors such as interagency working upon the delivery of services
- identify the characteristics and circumstances of children who are subject to compulsory measures of supervision at home and assess the relationship between these and the supervision required and provided
- describe the nature and experience for children subject to compulsory measures of supervision at home, taking account of professional and lay views about home supervision and including an assessment of the effectiveness of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 Regulations and Guidance
- identify the impact and outcome of home supervision for the child, including a description of the ending and withdrawing of compulsory measures of home supervision and identify points at which reviews of the home supervision requirement are sought.

Methods

The research involved the collection of data from varied sources:

- a postal survey of key informants with responsibility for child and family social work services at a policy level in local authorities
- secondary analysis of national data in respect of 5,683 children on home supervision requirements at 30 June 1999
- examination of 189 social work case files of children on supervision at home and postal questionnaires to 189 reporters
- postal questionnaires to elicit the views of 189 panel chairs, 189 social workers and 137 teachers involved with the school-aged children in the sample
- interviews with 20 families whose children were on supervision at home.

Characteristics and circumstances of the children on home supervision

A national data set of 5,683 children on home supervision in Scotland at 30 June 1999 indicated that there were more boys than girls, with the exception of those aged 0–7 where girls predominate. More girls had been referred on care and protection grounds, while more boys were referred on offence grounds. Only 18 per cent of the home supervision requirements had been in existence for more than three years. More re-referrals following the onset of home supervision were made in respect of boys (69%) than girls (56%) and more were on offence than non-offence grounds. The majority of those with no subsequent referrals during home supervision had initially been referred on non-offence grounds.

In the sample of 189 cases, the home circumstances revealed that the children had greater than average family size and were disproportionately drawn from lone parent households, from local authority housing and from households in which no adult was employed. Their poverty and disadvantage was striking. There

had been social work involvement, usually on a voluntary basis, prior to the supervision requirement in 86 per cent of the cases. During the period of home supervision, financial problems and housing problems were the difficulties noted most frequently in the case records, followed by problems of mental and physical health, domestic violence and alcohol and drug misuse. These multiple, complex and sometimes intractable problems posed a major challenge for intervention and a context in which securing beneficial changes in the life of the child was likely to be a difficult task.

The delivery of home supervision

In the majority (70%) of the 189 cases in the sample, services and resources were made available to the children and families in addition to direct social work input. About half of the additional services were provided by social work departments and about half by other statutory and voluntary agencies. The main services provided by social work departments, in order of frequency, were: practical home-based family support, groupwork, respite care, intermediate treatment, transport, family services provision, and financial support. The services provided by other agencies were, in order of frequency, educational services, voluntary services (the most common being the use of befrienders), drug and alcohol services, psychiatric services, and other health provision. The provision of services was one of two key areas identified by families as being particularly helpful to them in home supervision (the other being in respect of domestic violence). Social workers identified support services which would have been useful during the course of home supervision, but which were unavailable. The main ones were, in order of frequency, family support workers/home carers, community resource workers, befrienders, groupwork, parenting skills classes, and respite care.

A key feature of the social work task in cases of home supervision was the organisation of packages of care, akin to case management in community care. This required liaison with other service providers within the social work department, as well as with others in the interagency network.

Interagency liaison was a feature of many of the cases in the sample. The most frequent telephone contact was with schools; the most frequent written correspondence was with solicitors (principally concerned with residence and contact issues), followed by health and then statutory and voluntary agencies concerned with financial and material help for families. Teachers suggested that increased interagency contact would significantly improve home supervision. Some services were reported by social workers to perform more effectively than others; child and family psychiatric services and drug and alcohol services were not as highly rated as others, such as education, community child health and social work.

Social work contact with families

In the three month period at the beginning of the year preceding the annual review (for 112 of the 189 cases for which data was available), there were 659 face to face contacts with the child/family concerned, or one visit per fortnight on average. There were, however, 77 cases which were either unallocated for part or all of this time and/or for which no case notes were available which indicated the frequency of contact. If these cases were included the average number of visits would be lower.

The majority of social workers (69%) considered that their contact with the family had been at about the right frequency, while a minority (25%) thought that contact was not frequent enough and a few (6%) that it was too frequent. Fifty-nine per cent of panel members rated the social workers' contact with the family as of the right frequency and 39 per cent as not frequent enough. When social workers considered that the objectives of home supervision had not been achieved, a lack of social work input was identified by them as an important reason (second only to non-cooperation by the family). Families too were critical of the frequency of social work contact.

Social work resources and unallocated cases

Panel members, teachers, reporters and social workers all identified the need for more social work time as the single most important factor which would improve home supervision. A sizable number of

cases, 42 (22%), was identified as having no social worker attached to the family for a period of months in the year prior to annual review. These cases are colloquially known as 'unallocated' but, in practice, the picture is a little more complex. Some were allocated but extended periods of sick leave meant that no direct social work input was, in fact, being provided. Some were held by the senior social workers or team leaders, facilitating episodic intervention, for example, in response to a crisis or a request for a report for a hearing.

There was considerable geographical variation in the number of unallocated cases. About three quarters of unallocated cases were found in only four authorities. Eleven (36%) key informants reported that there were unallocated home supervision requirements in their authority in 2001, ranging in number from less than five to 39. The priority systems in place in some social work departments to aid decisions as to case allocation resulted in some home supervision requirements not being allocated.

There is a tension inherent in the system over the availability of social work resources. While no doubt panel members reach decisions about home supervision with awareness of the local resource context, their primary task, in accordance with legal requirements, is to reach decisions in the best interests of each individual child coming before a hearing. This in turn can pose demands on a service required to operate within a cash-limited budget. The main rationing devices open to social work departments are dilution - spreading the service more thinly than may be requisite or desirable - or the covert imposition of rationing through local systems of case prioritisation. In this study this led to a sizable number of cases being unallocated (or effectively unallocated) while the families were formally subject to compulsory measures of care through home supervision requirements.

The Regulations and Guidance (Scottish Office, 1997)

Seventy per cent of the key informants completing questionnaires in the local authorities considered the Regulations and Guidance to be fairly effective, compared with 13 per cent who thought they were ineffective. The majority (67%) of social workers described the Regulations and Guidance as either very or fairly helpful. However, 30 per cent reported that they did not use them at all and the majority (52%) did so only occasionally.

It appeared from the case files that some of the key requirements of the Regulations and Guidance were not being implemented in the course of home supervision. This was most striking in respect of the care plans and reviews. Ninety per cent of key informants indicated that social workers in their authority were expected to complete a care plan for children on home supervision. However, care plans were found in the case files for only 32 (17%) of the 189 children. The Arrangements to Look After Children (Scotland) Regulations 1996 require local authorities to carry out a review of children on home supervision within three months and thereafter within six months of the previous review. Reviews were recorded in the case files as having been held in only 13 per cent of cases in the year preceding the annual review. The Regulations and Guidance also stipulate that following the making of a home supervision requirement, the social worker should "arrange to visit the child and family immediately where there is a significant level of risk but in any case within two weeks." The first visit took place within two weeks in respect of only 31 per cent of the cases in the sample.

The findings concerning the use and implementation of the Regulations and Guidance suggest that children on home supervision may not be considered to be in all respects 'looked after children'. The Children's Services Plans (with the greater emphasis on children looked after away from home) and the numbers of cases in the sample which were not allocated to a social worker for a period of time may also be indicative of this. This can be understood, at one level, since the responsibilities of the local authority for children removed from their parents and accommodated in residential units or placed in foster care may seem qualitatively different from cases where the child remains at home, with primary responsibility for their daily care resting with their parents or carers. At another level, however, the children on home supervision can be seen as particularly vulnerable since the protection and the degree of surveillance which are (or should be) associated with a placement in a residential unit or in foster care are not as available to those living at

home. For whatever reasons, there does appear to be a disjuncture between the formal, legal status of children on home supervision as 'looked after' and the realities of practice.

Monitoring of home supervision requirements

Key informants in 13 (43%) local authorities indicated that the outcomes for children on home supervision were monitored, usually through the supervision of individual cases. It appeared that the results were rarely aggregated to inform a judgement about how well home supervision was working across the authority as a whole. Panel members identified the need for more robust methods of monitoring, whether by early review of specific cases at hearings or via the reporter or by social work departments themselves. Social workers also identified the need for better monitoring (for example, drawing up care plans and undertaking regular case reviews), placing this second only to an increase in social workers as a suggestion for improving home supervision. The findings indicate a need for closer monitoring of home supervision, whether internally within social work departments or through some external arrangements, to ensure more consistent levels of practice and compliance with Regulations and Guidance.

Outcomes

The outcomes in respect of home supervision were found to be broadly positive. Data from a variety of sources confirmed this. First, 83 per cent of key informants in local authority social work departments reported that they considered home supervision to be effective. The majority (52%) of panel members rated the home supervision in the cases concerned to have been excellent or good. Fifty-four per cent of teachers reported general improvements for the child during the period of home supervision. A large majority (87%) of social workers was of the view that the objectives of home supervision were fully or partially achieved in respect of the child. The satisfaction ratings concerning progress in the 189 cases in the sample, derived from panel members' written reasons at annual review, revealed that the largest category, 43 per cent, were considered to be satisfactory, 29 per cent were rated as mixed, with some progress noted alongside continued concerns, and 28 per cent unsatisfactory. Finally, most of the families interviewed expressed satisfaction with the social worker assigned to them during the period of home supervision, valuing their availability, provision of practical resources, understanding and ability to communicate.

When asked what, if anything, worked well in home supervision for the child, social workers identified the following five main factors: the availability of services/resources, an interagency approach, the importance of compulsory measures, the existence of advocacy for the child/support outwith the family home, and the capacity to protect the child/monitor safety.

When outcomes are considered in relation to the original grounds of referral, there is also consistency across the data sets. Ninety per cent of key informants ranked home supervision as very or fairly effective in care and protection cases, compared with 70 per cent in respect of children who offend. None rated home supervision for children who fail to attend school regularly as very effective and only 43 per cent considered it to be fairly effective. By contrast, 47 per cent considered it to be not very effective or not at all effective in these cases. The satisfaction ratings derived from panel members' written reasons confirm this rank order. Fifty-five per cent of those referred on care and protection grounds were rated satisfactory, 41 per cent of cases referred on offence grounds and only 12 per cent of cases concerning non-attendance at school. The majority (52%) of cases of non-attendance at school were rated unsatisfactory.

The high priority attached to care and protection cases, together with clear procedures, well developed interagency approaches, appropriate services and care plans were reported to contribute to this. The relatively poor success rate in respect of children referred on grounds of non-attendance at school led some key informants and some social workers and reporters to raise questions about the appropriateness of home supervision for this group of children and whether greater responsibility for tackling this problem should rest with education services accompanied, perhaps, by changes at the school level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found much to be positive about in relation to home supervision. Service provision by the social work department and others in the interagency network contributed to beneficial changes in the lives of the children concerned. Broadly positive views about the effectiveness of home supervision were expressed by social workers, panel members, teachers, key informants in local authorities and families. Children initially referred on grounds of care and protection were considered to have the most successful outcomes, followed by those referred on offence grounds. Home supervision was judged to work least well in respect of children referred on grounds of non-attendance at school without reasonable excuse.

Nonetheless, there were some parts of the country in which the service was severely affected by staff shortages, leaving cases either formally unallocated or in practice receiving a much reduced and episodic service. This geographical variation raises important issues not only of territorial justice in access to services across the country but concerns also about the well-being of vulnerable children and families who have been adjudged to require compulsory measures of care.

Where social workers were allocated there was a need for closer monitoring of home supervision, whether within social work departments or through some external arrangements, to ensure more consistent levels of practice and compliance with Regulations and Guidance.

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 Research Programme aims to monitor the implementation of the Act and to evaluate its operation and impact. Research Findings are published by Social Research and the Education Department Research, Economic and Corporate Strategy Unit (RECS).

If you want further copies of this Research Findings or have any enquiries about the work of RECS please contact us at:

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Children (Scotland) Act 1995: Home Supervision, the report that is summarised in this Research Findings, is available on the RECS website.

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